

Proximity to Disney helps Kissimmee become 'vacation-home capital'

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If DT Minich's vision is successful, Kissimmee will be known as the "Vacation Home Capital of the World" — complete with pro athletes and corporate executives popping in for stays at sprawling, richly appointed mansions.

"It's real exciting for us," said Minich, chief executive officer and president of Experience Kissimmee. "It's a whole different market."

Different doesn't begin to describe the luxury-rental-home market for which Kissimmee is becoming known.

Sharon Harley, president of Jeeves Holiday Homes, a luxury-rental-home management company, spends her days managing multimillion-dollar homes in the Reunion Resort area of Kissimmee.

Harley's portfolio includes managing 250 homes, almost 40 of which she has had a hand in designing, building and tailoring to the high-end vacation market.

"It is unbelievable," she said. "Now, every time another one gets built, you see something you've never seen before."

The newest house in her inventory is a 14,500-square-foot house with nine bedrooms, a two-lane bowling alley, fully stocked arcade, spa, racquetball court and a 12-seat in-home movie theater.

The house, which cost its English owner \$4.85 million to build, runs \$15,000 a week to rent.

It only went on the market at the end of June, and its first guests were four NBA players and their families, said Harley.

These luxury rentals aren't only about rest and relaxation.

They've become popular with corporations interested in a different view from the standard hotel and convention-space offerings of the region for retreats and executive getaways.

"I honestly think these large homes really lend themselves to corporate events," she said.

One house in particular, which went on the rental market two years ago, has become a favorite for corporate leaders. The 11 bedrooms comfortably sleep 26; the kitchen's big enough to cater for 22.

With every bedroom in that home having an en-suite bathroom, executives get their own private living space. The house rents for \$1,500 to \$2,500 a night, depending on the season.

"There's also lots of areas in this house where people can actually get their own space and spend some time alone," said Harley. "They can actually work if they need to."

The over-the-top accommodations, which Minich claims rival the region's nicest hotels such as the Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton, are resulting in a new clientele for Kissimmee.

Minich said Experience Kissimmee is switching from two- to four-month vacation-rental-home marketing campaigns to a year-round effort.

Grabbing the attention of international and domestic guests is the goal.

"We're having to work with international tour operators and travel trades," he said, adding they've been pushing for more travel-centric media coverage in publications such as Conde Nast magazines and The New York Times.

"I think it's also a growth market," he said. "We might see clients come in who might not have chosen Central Florida [before]," Minich said.

Builders who specialize in these custom properties expect an average of 30 new homes a month "for the foreseeable future," said Minich.

Overall, 3,400 new homes, each with five to 10 bedrooms, are expected to enter Kissimmee's luxury-rental market during the next three or four years.

Reunion Resort, where the bulk of Harley's homes are, is almost entirely short-term rentals. Though there are a few permanent residents there, they've come to expect a revolving door of neighbors.

Whether these homes will have a negative impact on the local hotel industry is unclear.

Minich and Richard Maladecki, president of the Central Florida Hotel and Lodging Association, think the upward trend adds to what's already in Kissimmee and the surrounding region.

"One of the reasons we attract 60 million guests to our destination is the various levels of our budget options," Maladecki said.

And though the homes might feel like they're built exclusively for the upper crust, Harley disagrees.

With the amount of space in each home, and the fact people would still, essentially, have the space they'd get in a hotel room, Harley thinks the homes make for perfect getaways for a group of friends.

As long as everyone's willing to split the tab.

"I think it just makes everything more flexible," she said. "It allows you to cater to your own individual needs. If one person wants a sandwich, make one."

No matter the growth of these homes, Minich said traditional hotels aren't going anywhere.

"Which is great for us, because now we have the full spectrum," he said.

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